



Conducted by
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“Could you please comment on Exodus 20:5, especially on the last phrase, ‘visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me’...”

Perhaps I can begin by quoting the verse in full, and *also quoting* the following and the previous verses: **“Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in the heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them; for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generations of them that hate me; And showing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments”**

THE SETTING

The above words are spoken by God to the children of Israel and form part of what is known as the decalogue or ten commandments. The first commandments are strongly put and concern idolatry. God does not intend to share the affections of His people with other “gods” of wood or stone. God demands of His people their single-mindedness in worship: *“I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, Thou shalt have no other gods before me.”* Again and again throughout the Old Testament God had occasion to repeat this prohibition, and to give notice that He would not, could not, tolerate men bowing down to worship inanimate objects. Idolatry was in effect a complete and total rejection of God, and we cannot be sur-

prised that God would be very angry at its practice. We can but express surprise that the people of God, who had been rescued from Egypt in such a spectacular way and had witnessed the sheer power of God in the Red Sea, could so soon defect from His worship and attempt to find satisfaction in bowing down before carvings of the sun, stars, fish etc. Even while Moses was in the mount writing God's commandments upon tablets of stone, the children of Israel were collecting items of gold, such as earrings and brooches, that they might melt them and form a golden calf. Can we wonder at the kindling of God's wrath? The worship of such "gods" was, then, understandably an abomination to God. Nevertheless, idolatry was practised by the Israelites for most of their history: and even in New Testament times the apostle Paul is aware of the tendency of the Jews to indulge in such things, and many times exhorts his hearers to "flee from idolatry".

In Exodus 20:5 and elsewhere, God made it very clear that those who defiled themselves in the practice would incur His undisguised disfavour, and God would *visit* his disfavour upon them. In fact, as the quotation maintains, He went farther and said that He would extend His disfavour to *the third and fourth generations* of any such.

Suffering Because Of Forefathers

It is, of course, a matter of casual observation that children do very often suffer the consequences of their parents' sins or crimes. If a family is evicted from a house because the parents don't pay the rent, then the children suffer too. An illegitimate child can suffer the stigma of being such, although no fault lies with the child. If because of laziness or extravagance on the part of parents poverty comes to a family, then the children suffer, again through no fault of their own. Children of those convicted of treason lose all rights and title to property. In a sense this would apply in the case of the statement we are considering in Ex. 20:5 and that when God extended his disfavour to those who took to idolatry their children would logically suffer the consequences. In a wider and national sense I suppose we could say that children are suffering today the legacy of the last world war, especially in Japan where the atomic bombs were dropped. Each generation, by what it does, commits and affects those who come after it. Each generation to some extent blames its predecessors for the state of the nation or of the world. We hear and see plenty of that today among the "angry young men". To be more specific I suppose that each generation of the Israelites, very often with good reason, blamed the generation which went before it for the conditions prevailing at the time. The children of the captivity, for instance, could rightfully say that they suffered captivity because of the sins of their fathers and forefathers. Later generations of the Jews suffered many things, including the fall of Jerusalem, because of the sins of Manasseh (see 2 Kings 24:3,4 etc.). Many of Israel's kings brought ruin and suffering upon the contemporary and later generations.

The Justice Of God

I think that the reason for the question before us is that it seems unjust and unfair that generations should suffer for the sins of their fathers or forefathers, and that such an injustice is out of keeping with the nature of God.

First of all let me say that God did not visit the iniquity upon the *children* of the third and fourth generations (innocent babes), but the adult *descendants* to the third and fourth generations. We should also note that God said He would "*visit*" the iniquity of the fathers upon the future generations and much depends upon *the form* these visitations would take. For instance, after the Israelites had worshipped the golden calf while Moses was in the mount, Moses tried to appeal to God for clemency on their behalf (Ex. 33:31-35). God said, "Therefore now go, lead the people unto the place of which I have spoken unto thee; behold mine Angel shall go

before thee; nevertheless in the day when I *visit* I will *visit* their sin unto them. And the Lord plagued the people because they made the calf, which Aaron made." On this occasion, then, God's '*visitations*' consisted of plagues. One would need to examine critically the whole O.T. to enumerate the form and frequency of all of God's visitations, and their far-reaching effects. In many instances His visitations involved the *withdrawing of blessings* which otherwise would have been bestowed; for example withholding His aid in battle and allowing the Israelites to be defeated. Most of God's visitations (indeed all of them as far as I know) were of a *temporal* nature and innocent generations of the Jews never suffered *eternal* loss because of the wickedness of previous generations. A righteous man of *any* generation, although incurring temporal disadvantages from previous generations, individually was well beloved of God. Many a righteous Jew surrounded by idolatry and other evils sat down and wept at the state of the nation. The nation would receive God's visitation, *and he with it*, but he as an individual would be well beloved of the Father. And so, although God's visitations would be to the third and fourth generations of them that hated God the innocent of those generations would, although sharing the visitation, be as acceptable to God as though they had lived in a righteous generation. Therefore I suggest that the disadvantages suffered by the *innocent* in the third and fourth generations was in temporal and physical things. The *guilty* in such generations suffered temporally, of course, but eternally as well. To me, God's justice in this stands quite unimpaired.

Ezekiel's Explanation

I commend to the questioner, and all interested in the question, a reading of Ezekiel chap. 18, which admirably deals with the ethics involved here. The chapter is too long to quote in full, but I shall try to paraphrase it and give the gist of its contents. (see also Ezek. 14 and 20):

A cynical proverb was common amongst Israel at this time: "the fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge". The implication was, of course, that because the fathers were evil the children, who had not eaten sour grapes (or been evil) were suffering the consequences. By the proverb Israel were in fact accusing God of rank injustice. The proverb angered God and He instructs Ezekiel to give Israel His rejoinder. His answer to Israel is also an admirable answer to the question before us. God here emphasises *individual responsibility to Him, no matter in what generation we live*, third or fourth or any other. "All souls are mine," says God (v.4) whether father or son, and *the soul that sinneth, it shall die*". It does not matter what our father, or forefathers were like, or indeed what our sons will be like, it is what *we* are like, that matters. Only *the souls that sin* will die, not their sons, or sons' sons. If a man is just and righteous he will be well pleasing to God in any generation (vs. 5-9). If this good man has an evil son, the evil son will die (be condemned) (vs. 10-13). If this evil son, has in turn, a good son, this good son will be well pleasing to God, notwithstanding he had an evil father (vs. 14-17).

(v.19) "Yet say ye. Why? doth not the son bear the iniquity of the father?" God gives His answer: "When the son hath done that which is lawful and right, and hath kept all my statutes, and hath done them, he shall surely live. The *soul that sinneth*, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him."

There is nothing wrong here with the *justice* of God. But God goes on to show in the rest of the chapter that He is also a *merciful* God, and the way of repentance is always open: (v.21) "But if the wicked will turn from all the sins that he hath committed, and keep all my statutes, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall

surely live and not die;" (v.23) "Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord God: and not that he should return from his ways and live;" (v.25) "Yet ye say. The way of the Lord is not equal. Hear now, O house of Israel; Is not my way equal? are not your ways unequal?" And so God's answer to the proverb is that no man's teeth can be set on edge unless he personally has been eating the "sour grapes".

In summing up I think we can say that Ex. 20:5 certainly refers to God's threat to "visit" His displeasure upon the descendants (to the third and fourth generation) of them that hate God but that only temporal and physical disadvantages, serious enough, would accrue. Those who hate God are referred to, and God (as in Ezek. 18) still would make exceptions to all the righteous amongst these evil generations. Or as in Ex. 20:6, "showing mercy unto the thousands (thousands of generations," Deut.7:9) of them that love me, and keep my commandments."

God's mercy runs deeper than His wrath.